NYMPH OF THE WEST.

BY HOWARD SEELY.

I must not omit to mention a certain formality in dress which Miss Dallas began to affect about this time. It was in the direction of long trains and trailing habits. There was much mysterious rehearsal in the seclusion of her little room, a disposition to gather her skirts in one gloved hand and tiptoe about, avoiding intermediate objects with an acquired daintiness and grace. There were certain fastidious airs of manner which were deftly caught and quite as faithfully rehearsed in private. During these ceremonies a small riding whip, formerly presented to Cynthia by Mr. Buck Jerrold, was generally carried lightly in the right hand. A swift canter over the adjacent hills, attended by the same scrutiny of the remote horizon, invariably followed this painstaking performance.

Such mysterious behavior was not without provoking the comment of other members of the household.

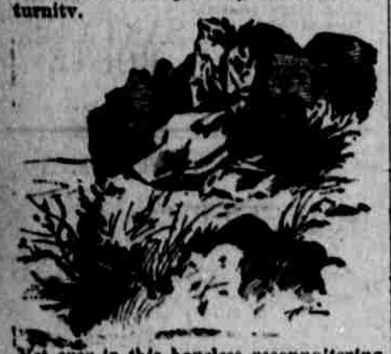
"I should reckon yo' was practicin fo' the tight rope, wi' all yo' airs and graces, Mis' Cynthy," the ebony Amelia remonstrated.

"Is there any private theatricals goin to come off down at San Marcus?" inquired the mystified Alcides, having through the open door caught a glimpse of his daughter attitudinizing. "I didn't know, from that thar high steppin, but you war posin fur the stony hearted princess thet refuses the poor but deservin young man in the play."

To all this ingenious badinage Miss Dallas preserved an attitude of disdainful reticence, but she was manifestly unhappy and ill at ease. That joyous, light hearted gayety which once possessed her had taken wings. She sang no more, where once her glad voice challenged the mocking bird. She was as capricious as an April day. Peevish and fretful with her father for the most part, there were intervals of sudden tenderness when she overwhelmed him with kisses and caresses. Possibly at such moments a certain absent individual was ever present to her fancy whose name she never suffered to pass her lips. Philosophers aver that in matters of the heart there is a species of cold comfort in thus lavishing the affections by proxy.

During this unsatisfactory period Cynthia's treatment of Mr. Buck Jerrold was most remarkable. This gentleman had been wont to visit her often, to pass hours in her society, to sit quietly by her side silent and thoughtful, smoking his pipe and noting her every word or action with a reverence and admiration that was little short of worship. Formerly Miss Dallas had permitted this oppressive homage as if hers by a species of divine right, had laughed and chatted with him pleasantly, accepted his little gifts and keepsakes gratefully, sent him upon her errands with the air of conferring a favor and exerted her many fascinations in a way known only to the sex.

All this had been most agreeable to Jerrold. With evident satisfaction he basked in the sunshine of her favor. But a change came suddenly about. With the advent of the spring roundups came more frequent visits on the part of that gentleman and a strange waywardness in Cynthia's reception. She greeted him with marked embarrassment and restraint. The former silence of his manner was now eclipsed by her own taciturnity.



Yet even in this hopeless reconnoitering the days sped on and on.

Jerrold was often astounded at his eloquence in his efforts to entertain her, but Cynthia was at all times absent and distraught, and appeared to be haunted by a nervous dread that Mr. Jerrold was about to say something which it would give her great pain to hear. Upon the slightest pretext she would escape him and bury herself amid the solitudes of the sympathetic pines. Here that strange trouble which made her heart ache would occasionally overflow her eyes, and there were tears shed in the dim woods as little bidden as understood—tears which the pines bemoaned and the bluebirds and squirrels held sacred, but which somehow brought the balm of relief to her who shed them.

I do not think through it all that Miss Dallas was really conscious of being in love, only in a general way that she was bereaved and disappointed. The occurrences of the past few months had come to her in the light of a revelation. She was suddenly aware of the existence of some one who possessed for her a peculiar sympathy; whose words awoke a responsive echo in her heart—some one immeasurably superior to the rough men she usually encountered. She could not explain the strange claim this hitherto unrealized being had upon her. She only knew that it existed; that she longed for its influence; that she grieved when it was denied. And there was associated with this feeling, as there always is, one of pique and injury for the apparent neglect which she had suffered.

How much this state of mind was alleviated when the obliging sheriff put into her hands the guitar sent by Henry Bruce it is impossible to say. Certain it is that never instrument was the recipient of more tender treatment. She adorned it with ribbons, carried it about with her constantly and practiced assiduously upon it. About this time the [illegible]

rival, abandoned his own exertions upon the violin. He viewed the advent of the guitar with suspicion and commented upon it with cynicism. Apparently he recognized in the soft harmonies Cynthia's deft fingers struck from the strings a dangerous ally to sentiment. Alcides, as we have seen, was a foe to romance.

"Ye wanter look out, Cynthy, fur the poetry and nonsense thet thar tarnal thing'll fill you chuck full of, ef ye once turn it loose on yer onguarded feelin's," he said gravely, surprising her once playing upon it with eyes that were wistful and far away. "It's a destroyer of the appetite, and gener'ly plumb full o' onsatisfactoriness," bestowing a glance upon the glistening strings that was full of foreboding. "I knew a girl once thet was thet led away by one of them jinglin critters thet she didn't do nothin else but play an lie round, a-longin and a-yearnin, until by and by the sallow faced critter got herself clean bewitched. Her family and friends could do nothin with her. She wouldn't eat nothin. And fin'ly she went into a gallopin consumption, and they buried her one very damp day in the arly spring."

But in spite of this terrible example of the fascination of guitar playing Cynthia still persisted in her practicing. She endured with cheerfulness the sore fingers, tired wrists and other annoyances which this exacting instrument imposes upon its devotees. And she received no end of encouragement in other ways. The mocking birds which fled aghast from the shrieking violin sometimes favored her with imitative outbursts—that sincerest form of flattery. Perched on some tossing spray or flickering here and there in their odd "half mourning," they produced snatches of her waltzes and fandangoes. There was a certain sentimental lizard with a speculative eye that would bask daily upon a sunny rock, and from his rapt demeanor during her performance was apparently enabled to obtain glimpses of the infinite, hitherto denied. And Aulus sympathized and lent his quiet and dignified approval. And the fawn was soothed into a dreamy languor that was fast becoming habitual.

So the days passed, and Cynthia's heart found much of consolation, and Mr. Buck Jerrold wondered at the change in his dulcinea and had long conferences with the mystified Alcides, who was annoyed and fretful and made mysterious reference to the prevalence of malaria and the existence of "dumb ager"—the inference being that his lovely daughter was suffering from the maladies of a forward spring, until one day Mr. Jerrold surprised the old man with this query:

"Ye don't reckon, then, thet the visit of thet thar Henry Bruce hez hed anythin to do with this yer change? It's my opinion thet's what's done it."

"Why, he wa'n't here more'n two days at the furthest," remonstrated the father, staring at his questioner.

"That's all right," returned Jerrold meditatively, "but it don't take any great length of time with the proper person. I've bean told thar's been cases where it was only a word or a look thet done the biz'ness. Purvided thet's the true state of the case," he added, stretching his huge limbs awkwardly, while a weary look crept suddenly into his eyes, "purvided thet's it, and he proves himself to be a better man nur I am, Cynthy must take her ch'ice. I hevn't got nothin ag'in him. He's a square sort of chap, and a man ez is a man can stand bein beat by a straightforrard feller who is better fixed and better favored."

Then came a letter from Henry Bruce to Cynthia, couched in delicate terms, wherein he expressed regret that he was unable to act as her escort to the coming ball at San Marcus, but that courtesy necessitated that he should accompany Miss Stafford. Cynthia perused this missive calmly, wept over it in private and then acted with the perverseness of womankind. She did not change her attitude toward the deserving Mr. Jerrold, but she sat down and indited a long epistle to the neglectful and dangerous Captain Foraker, in which she reproached that gentleman for his long absence from her side, represented herself as languishing from lack of his attentions and inquired if he could spare time from his engrossing military duties to take her to the coming festivity.

And Captain Foraker, vain, critical and complacent, read this letter carefully over his after dinner cigar, smiled superciliously, adjusted his officer's cap rakishly over his distracting curls, and mounting his horse rode over from the post and passed the afternoon with Cynthia.

That he was received with a cordiality he had no reason nor right to expect; that Cynthia flirted with him desperately and in a manner calculated to strike despair into the heart of Buck Jerrold, and that the irate Alcides was moved several times in the course of that eventful afternoon to cast longing glances in the direction of the "Silent Mary" may be readily imagined by the reader who has remarked the inconsistency of woman when dominated by pique.

Small wonder that Captain Foraker promised to go to the ball; that he listened cheerfully to Cynthia's plan to visit Miss Bertha Maverick, the fascinating daughter of the village blacksmith, and agreed to call for her at that lady's home on the evening in question, and that he rode back to his quarters with a self satisfied smile upon his supercilious features, curling his gray mustache and otherwise pluming himself upon the triumphs of the afternoon. That after his departure Cynthia dismissed him utterly from his mind, and that she hated Miss Stafford cordially and was conscious in her heart of hearts that Henry Bruce was more fascinating than ever—are facts that will readily occur to her appreciative and discriminating sex, to whose tender sympathies her present emotions are intrusted.

CHAPTER IX.

For weeks it had been apparent at San Marcus that a social event of unusual importance was impending. For weeks a flutter of expectancy had disquieted the feminine heart, displaying itself in animated gossip upon the street corners, in an alarming tendency to indulge in afternoon calls and a reckless patronage of seamstress and milliner. There was much promenading in the single business street of the little village, indulged in so aimlessly as to give the observer the general impression of a rehearsal. But it was apparent that feminine curiosity culminated at the river, whither, over the level plain, the thoroughfare of San Marcus led, and to which locality the footsteps of the fair daughters were most persistently directed.

Foremost among these lovely pedestrians was Miss Bertha Maverick, with an eye like the flash of a bayonet and a profile decidedly aquiline. She could be seen on any pleasant afternoon, defying the admiration of the baffled sun with a parasol of pale pink and leading on, as it were, by this oriflamme of sentiment, the thronging cohorts of Texan coquetry. Three days of aimless pilgrimaging on the part of the San Marcus maidens, and all at once was seen the method of this vernal madness.

Occasional horsemen began to be met with on the dusty highway. By degrees the number of these was augmented to mounted squads and groups, until at last their proportions reached those of a generous cavalcade. Of course this irruption of eligible manhood was the occasion of much indiscriminate flirtation, and there were many glances given and exchanged that boded ill for the future peace of mind of the parties concerned. Mischievous eyes challenged observation beneath dainty bonnets, and the tilted sunshade was eloquent of the warfare of Cupid.

Need it be said that bronzed and bearded faces accepted these overtures with more than equal frankness, that the fluttering handkerchief in every instance received the recognition of the raised sombrero, and that everywhere along this dangerously active highway there was a disposition on the part of either sex to halt frequently and look back?

But once in town, these amorous advances of the sterner sex gave rise to reckless outlay of capital and a remarkable solicitude in matter of dress. The barber was put into requisition, and the demand for "b'iled shirts" and "store clothes" threatened to exceed the limited supply of those articles.

Meanwhile notes in very erratic handwriting were constantly flying about. Mr. Lariat, in conformance with a custom as absurd as unnecessary, was giving Miss Lone Star preliminary notice that he contemplated the pleasure of calling upon her, and the latter lady was responding that she would take pleasure in being at home in anticipation of that gratifying event. And so feminine vanity was flattered on the one hand and the manly breast disquieted for some days to come on the other by these rare opportunities for visiting, the dearth of womanhood upon the frontier rendering young manhood practically defensoless. And to facilitate this dangerous state of things the event of the ball approached, at which music and the dance—those destroyers of philosophy—were to finish matters and put the coup de grace to the general infatuation.

Through the foresight of Bruce and Kernochan, the best room in the Half Way House had been engaged in advance for Kate and Edith. For themselves the gentlemen accepted with good humor such primitive quarters as opportunity afforded. On the morning of the eventful day they drove down to San Marcus in a light conveyance, reaching the little hostelry in time for dinner. Here they registered in the small blank book which answered for the usual hotel register, and Miss Stafford noted with some merriment that an entry made by Phil Kernochan on Christmas day, two years previous, occurred only four pages back. Here that lady's patrician nostrils were saluted with the odor of kerosene and frontier cookery, and after enduring the stuffy atmosphere and rheumatic appointments of her bedroom she came down to dinner with an amusement very similar to that with which luxurious people enter upon the enjoyment of a picnic.

Doubtless by the time she had discussed this remarkable meal, eaten amid promiscuous society and overseered by the officious proprietor—who kept up a running fire of conversation with the myrmidons of the kitchen through a long slit in the wainscot, and dealt his plates and appetizing dishes over the heads of his guests with great recklessness and liberality—the novelty of Texan hotel life began to pall somewhat upon the young lady.

I cannot say that Edith's appetite was improved, either by the panoramic view of hotel cookery the wainscot afforded, or by the gentleman opposite, who ate molasses on his pie and supplied a very wide mouth with a very large knife, and a general suggestion that the unnatural size of this aperture was due to the hazard attending the experiment. Howbeit, the meal was endured, and perhaps in dread of dyspeptic retribution Miss Stafford proposed to Henry Bruce to take her for a short stroll through the town. To this the gentleman readily assented, and passing the long line of vicious and kicking saddle horses tethered in front of the hotel they joined the animated procession of strollers that idled through the main street of San Marcus.

I leave to the imagination how much attention the fair northerner attracted, what admiring glances from under broad sombreros were cast after her erect figure and graceful carriage, and with what envious whispers of detraction the belles of the village remarked the faultlessness of her fashionable walking dress. But I must mention one incident of this afternoon walk. They had reached a point about half way between the hotel and the river when a familiar voice caused Bruce to raise his eyes. Cynthia stood before him, looking very pretty and engaging from the becoming depths of a quaint poke bonnet. She was accompanied by an elderly man in the dress of an officer. He was nonchalantly puffing a cigar. Miss Bertha Maverick, escorted by a cowman of athletic build and awkward gait, was just behind her.

A quick color mounted to Cynthia's cheek, and she bowed hurriedly to Bruce as she raised her eyes with a smile of coquetry to the man at her side. A rapid interchange of hostilities passed between the ladies in a discriminating survey of one another's costumes, which was more expressive than words. Miss Bertha Maverick, with supercilious eyelids and defiant nostrils, re-enforced her less aggressive companion. Bruce, who was about to speak, noting at once the armed neutrality of all parties, raised his hat and passed on, but as he did so, he heard Miss Bertha Maverick remark in a high, metallic voice:

"That's the stuckup piece you was tellin me about—eh, Cynthia? Well, ef I reckoned I was so powerful fascinatin, I wouldn't let every one know it whenever I met 'em. The airs and graces of thet fast-colored brunette is enough to natch'ally paralyze an 8-day kitchen clock."

With the first shadows of evening public curiosity began to be attracted in the direction of a long, low structure, whose spacious outlines and shutterless windows showed black against the lighter sky.

The building had been reared in the interests of Erin by a prosperous Hibernian, who rejoiced in the classic name of Ulysses Magindy and consecrated his architectural efforts and poetic memories under the title of "Tara's hall," but the cynical Texan youth were wanting in reverence for Ireland's legendary past. "Tarrier's hall" was the popular rendering of Mr. Magindy's poetic christening. Actuated by the same spirit of skepticism they pelted the edifice with mud and stones, and sent vagrant tomato cans on voyages of discovery through its ancient lights. Externally it was a pathetic diagram of its owner's highly lacerated feelings.

But there were occasions when the importance of Tarrier's hall impressed itself even upon this derisive public. During political meetings, religious revivals and temperance crusades the hand of the vandal was staid. Among such intervals of immunity was the present. The very rabble that had been most active in bombardment now bestowed themselves in attempted renovation and repair. The spacious auditorium was swept and aired, the relics of barbarism were removed, the drafts from the windows effectually sealed by the intervention of cardboard, bits of carpet and cast offhats, and even the redeeming touches of putty and varnish were here and there attempted.

And when feminine taste was added to the rude but practical efforts of men it was wonderful to note the transforming change—to see how the ravages of time and abuse yielded to a little well bestowed decoration. On this occasion the San Marcus maidens had employed the garniture of hemlock boughs and gayly colored muslin with telling effect, and the tallow candles perched everywhere seemed to threaten a general conflagration.

Mr. Ulysses Magindy himself was at present going about the building and lighting these candles with a long pole, attended by a gang of small boys who restrained their uncomplimentary epithets in view of the coming festivity. And scarcely had the last elevated dip commenced to contribute its greasy droppings to the gratuitous shower that rained everywhere upon the ballroom floor, when with laughter and merriment the guests began to arrive and take up their positions on the hard wooden benches that were ranged at either end of the room.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Lucky.

"He was awfully wude," said Jarley. "He slammed the door square in my face."

"Dear me," returned Hicks. "It's lucky you have a hard face; otherwise it might have got broken."—Harper's Bazar.

The Right Season.

Fagleigh—I wonder why it is there are so many weddings take place in the autumn.

Wagleigh—Traditional custom. Adam and Eve were married around about the fall.—Vogue.